

A lonely road for Lithuania

By Anatole Kaletsky

The Soviet Union is getting what it deserves for bullying Lithuania – support from the US. The Bush Administration's refusal to condemn the Lithuanian energy embargo has obviously surprised and shaken President Landsbergis, but the tiny Baltic country is even more isolated and friendless than it thinks.

Behind the Bush Administration's ambiguous public gestures lurks a conscious and officially-acknowledged bias against the Lithuanians' impetuous tactics and in favour of Mr Gorbachev's measured approach to constitutional and territorial restructuring.

But the most striking pro-Soviet bias has appeared where the Lithuanians most ardently expected help – US public opinion.

On a remote foreign policy issue like Lithuania, American opinion is highly susceptible to government manipulation and this seems to be exactly what has occurred. In countless newspaper articles and TV news items, it has become *de rigueur* to criticise the "impatience," "recklessness" and "naivety" of the Landsbergis Government. To judge by the opinion polls, the media experts in the White House have scored another hit.

According to a Wall Street Journal/NBC poll last week, 61 per cent of Americans consider "maintaining friendly ties" with Gorbachev more important than supporting Lithuanian independence. In a Time/CNN survey 65 per cent said that Lithuania was "none of our business." And large majorities in both said the Gorbachev-Bush summit should go ahead even if Moscow uses force in Lithuania.

This strong pro-Soviet bias in US public opinion – and the Administration's role in creating it – raises a mind-boggling possibility. Is the American backing for Gorbachev in Lithuania the first concrete manifestation of a new geo-political alliance between the US and the USSR? If this were true and the alliance prospered, the implications for world peace would be enormous. Yet before we get over-excited, a vital caveat must be observed.

Gorbachev is worth support-

ing in Lithuania, but only for the right reasons. Advancing disarmament and promoting perestroika are not sufficient reasons for unconditionally supporting him in all circumstances, as some officials in Washington now seem to imply.

Gorbachev must not go unchallenged if he opposes western strategic interests such as the unification of Germany; or if he violates western moral standards, for instance by continuing to acquiesce in the persecution of Soviet Jews.

The West must now ask itself, therefore, if Gorbachev's Lithuanian policies deserve support for reasons beyond crude real-politik. Fortunately, the answer is "yes."

Lithuania's demand for instant independence should be no more acceptable to any western country than it is to the USSR. The historic Lithuania now being "recreated" has existed as a fully-independent country for just 22 of the last 600 years. Even in the four-centuries before it was annexed by Russia in 1795, Lithuania was only the junior partner in a confederation dominated by Poland. During the brief period of "freedom" from 1918 to 1940, the present capital of Vilnius was not even in Lithuania. It was called Wilno and controlled by Poland. If Lithuania is so keen on its pre-war status, would it give up its capital?

This kind of question invariably arises when boundaries are redrawn and nations are redefined by history. That is precisely why countries cannot simply be created or re-created through unilateral declarations of independence. Nor is legality the central issue.

Britain and France acquired most of their colonies in just as "illegal" a fashion as Stalin did in seizing the Baltics; this did not make the old empires any easier to dismantle. The West has learned through half a century of painful experience that de-colonisation is a long and complex process. The Lithuanians and Russians alike must now learn patiently from this experience. At best, they can avoid some of the western empires' bloody mistakes.